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Negro Leagues and College Football Playoff

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - NEGRO LEAGUES AND COLLEGE
FOOTBALL PLAYOFF
DECEMBER 22, 2020

Last week, the Commissioner of Baseball announced that from this point on the Negro Leagues that were operating between 1920 and 1948 would be "elevated" to "Major League status" by Major League Baseball. He added that "MLB is proud to highlight the contributions of the pioneers who played from 1920-1948." The action was presented as a culmination of the centennial celebration of the founding of the Negro Leagues in 1920. The statistics from those leagues now become a part of the official records.

There has been a range of reaction to this announcement from across the baseball landscape. The two immediate reactions were: first, to welcome the change, and second, to ask why it took so long. These were followed by more complex and nuanced reactions encompassing a wide range of views.

Some asked why it was in the power of MLB to "elevate" these leagues that, in fact, needed no elevation. Among a vast swath of baseball historians, these leagues and players have been recognized as major leagues for quite some time. For African Americans, there was never any question of this status, and for historians who began researching the Negro Leagues and its players, particularly those working during the 1960s, there was a call for this recognition.

Major League Baseball performed a similar "elevation" of status in 1968 when a Special Committee on Baseball Records decided that three 19th century leagues and the Federal League (1914-15) should be classified as major leagues. This was prompted by the issue of which leagues should be included in the forthcoming Baseball Encyclopedia. A Committee of five white men was appointed by Baseball Commissioner William Eckert, "Baseball's Unknown Soldier." In their deliberations the Negro Leagues were not even under consideration. The subject never came up and there was no public protest that followed. This was one of the more remarkable actions in Baseball's racist past.

Now the Commissioner's Office claims it is "correcting an oversight." Of course it was not an oversight at all, but the result of both the unofficial and official policies of MLB. One

of the ironies operating here is that the organization that created and sustained the segregation of baseball should now think it was within their purview to "elevate" anyone and then call the need for the correction an "oversight."

This is a small sample of the reactions to last week's announcement, and there were many more. In point of fact, the players in the Negro Leagues always considered themselves to be major leaguers. They were the best players playing at the highest level that they were allowed to play. That MLB refused to recognize that fact, and now has reversed course, doesn't change anything. The Negro Leagues were major leagues and that didn't change as a result of last week's announcement.

The Commissioner and his staff need to be alerted to the difference between "elevate" and "acknowledge."

Switching gears to college football, it is not possible to let the annual charade of the College Football Playoff (CFP) Committee go by without some comment, particularly in this strange football season. As most of you know, this Committee meets once a week beginning in early November and votes on the top college football teams in the country. The final meeting determines the four teams that will be matched up for the CFP National Championship.

The CFP Committee, the television networks led by ESPN, and others have sold the idea that their decision will set the field for the National Championship. The CFP, in point of fact, is a cartel consisting of representatives of what are called the Power Five Conferences. These five are the SEC, the ACC, the Big Ten, the Pac-12, and the Big 12. This is not a National entity.

The Committee meets each week over the final five weeks of the season and votes on the top 25 teams in Division I football. Oddly, the top teams are nearly universally chosen from the Power Five membership, and in the end those chosen to compete for the CFP Championship are from the Power Five. Since its inception Alabama, Clemson, and Ohio State have taken up permanent residence in the top four who play for the CFP Championship. This is not the National Championship, but it does play one on TV.

The Committee conducts its business in a solemn and serious manner, aided and abetted by the national sports media, creating a phony atmosphere of drama and mystery. Only those who meet in the Sistine Chapel rival this conclave. This season, the top four teams remained the same throughout the entire five-week voting process. The order of ranking changed but the chosen four did not, regardless of the actual results on the gridiron. It seemed to matter not all if your team played, didn't play, played a Covid depleted team, or was itself a Covid depleted team.

Each year, the myth is floated that a team outside the Power Five conferences might, just might, be among the chosen four. This year two undefeated teams playing at a high level, but not a Power Five level, were tantalizingly mentioned by the press as possible candidates for the chosen four. At this point, it is difficult to imagine why anyone would fall for this tease and think they had a chance to join what the *New York Times* called "College Football Royalty."

One other little nicety was addressed when the semi-final game set for the Rose Bowl was moved to AT&T Stadium, the House that Jerry Built, in Texas. This was done because California would not alter its Covid-19 protocols to allow spectators at the game. So, the CFP Committee blew off public health concerns and went to a location that had less stringent public health rules. Throughout this strange season, university administrators insisted their number one concern was the health and safety of the student athletes, rather than any other factors.

This time, then, there is a charade within a charade as the Committee claimed they were moving the game so that families of players and coaches could attend. Money, of course, was not a factor, nor apparently was the health and safety of the student athletes.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you Happy Holidays and reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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